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Author(s): John Hartmann
Review by: John Hartmann
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The government has republished Buddhist texts out of use since the revolution and imported other texts from Thailand. Evans sees the origins of this Buddhist revival in the growing prosperity in the towns that began in the mid-1980s. It was then that money began flowing again for the repair of *vats*, for the building of Buddhist monuments, and for other highly visible forms of merit-making. But in recent years the government has also been recovering the traditional patronage role.

Evans's book provides an intriguing picture of a society rapidly re-appropriating its traditions. Since the overthrow of the old traditions had been the regime's central raison d'etre, the trends visible today naturally raise the question, "Why the revolution?"

Arthur J. Dommen
Bethesda, Maryland

The Rama Jataka in Laos: A Study in the Phra Lak Phra Lam by Sachchidanand Sahai. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation. 1996. Vol. I: xii + 348 + 4 maps; Vol. II: viii + 340. $49.95, cloth. Distributed by Southeast Asia Publications, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University.

These two volumes are the English companion-pieces to the original Lao *Rama Jataka*, which was edited by Sachchidanand Sahai and published in 1973 by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (Vientiane) in New Delhi. The Lao *Rama Jataka* is but one of several Southeast Asian recensions of the Indian epic tale about the exiled Indian prince, Rama ("Lam" or "Phra Lam" in Lao). The Thai version, for one, is called the *Ramakian*. Dr. Sahai's massive and meticulous work of scholarship in the Lao *Rama Jataka* and in the present two volumes is the result of a lifetime of devoted research in the face of many obstacles, the greatest of which was possibly the task of locating and piecing together a definitive edition from fragments of six parallel palm leaf texts located in and around Vientiane. Palm leaf manuscripts of the same story were reported in Roi Et (Northeastern Thailand), Savannakhet, and Champassak, suggesting the tale's widespread popularity in Central and Southern Laos and Northeastern Thailand. One of the palm leaf manuscripts used by Dr. Sahai is a copy of an earlier manuscript dated 22 May 1850 which in turn appears to have been developed from a smaller

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nucleus of still earlier written texts or to have been written down directly from oral tradition. Through this literary work, then, we are proffered the language and culture of Laos going back at least two hundred years or more.

The *Phra Lak Phra Lam* or *Rama Jataka*—an adaptation of the *Ramayana* of the Indian poet Valmiki—is presented in the form of a jataka: a tale of one of the previous lives of the Buddha. It is "extra-canonical" in that it is not found in the canonical collection of 550 jataka stories. Nevertheless, it is second in popularity only to the *Vessantara Jataka*; both are read aloud for days in annual merit-making temple festivals. The Lao version, like the Indian original, focuses very much on the theme of pride in the villain Ravana. In the Indian tale, Ravana is a ten-headed demon who abducts women in the course of his conquests.

The Lao version of the tale presents a double retelling of the story. In the first volume of this translation, the Lao Ravana (who incidentally has only one head), is heir to the throne of southerly Indraprasthanagara (the Khmer kingdom). He is handsome, powerful, audacious, and in Sahai's terms, "the *enfant terrible* of the royal family." His cousins, Rama (Lam) and Rama's younger brother Lak, are princes from the northerly city-kingdom of Candrapuri Sri Satta Naga (Vientiane) and are the tale's two other main characters. The story takes place along the axis of the Mekong River and its tributaries from Vientiane down to Savannakhet and narrates the travels—by flying horse no less—of the two brothers in their quest to rescue their older sister, Canda. Canda has been abducted by her cousin, the vain and obstinate Ravana, who refuses to return her despite the pleas of his mother. The brothers ride to Indraprastha and recover their older sister. Ravana then comes meekly to Vientiane where he meets Rama's conditions, is permitted to marry Canda, and swears an oath of loyalty to Rama.

The second volume relates the more famous version of the story. At the beginning of this tale, Ravana has moved from Cambodia to Lanka (probably Sri Lanka, says Sahai). Ravana has tricked the wife of Indra (king of the gods) into sleeping with him. Having discovered the trick, Indra's wife enters Canda's womb, is reborn as Ravana's daughter, and immediately tries to stab him. Ravana casts the newborn girl adrift, but Indra gives her special magic that sustains her until she is adopted by a hermit who names her Sita. The young woman becomes famous for her beauty. Both Ravana and Rama try to win her as wife, but only Rama succeeds in

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marrying her. Before Rama can bring her back to Vientiane, Ravana tricks the couple and steals Sita away to Lanka where she is held prisoner for three years. In an epic campaign involving magical beasts, monkey armies, and a bridge across the ocean to Lanka, Rama and his brother invade Ravana's kingdom and Rama kills the demon king Ravana in a duel to free his bride and take her back home to Vientiane.

In many respects, the poetic narrative is a colorful and informative travelogue. This is particularly true of the first volume, which describes the people and customs and the flora and fauna of a broad stretch of the Mekong river. Throughout the two volumes the outlines of the story become a vessel which the Lao poet fills with local beliefs and attitudes on acceptable and unacceptable social behavior: sibling rivalry, incest (marriage between first cousins), bride price, and wifely status (major and minor) in a polygamous society, to name a few themes. It is equally a political treatise on the formation of city states (*meuang*), the sale and exchange of slaves (*kha*), the freedom of movement and marriage rights of slaves, ethnic distinctions, and native vs. foreigner (*khaek*) issues, and so on. As a work of literature intended to be read aloud to large audiences, the majority of which were likely unlettered, it is a verbal artwork of unsurpassed beauty, excitement, and humor. The many interspersed passages of courting poetry (*lam*, or male-female flirtatious exchanges sung in poetic form)—presented as Rama and his brother Lak engage in courting local women and contract multiple marriages (sixteen of which are meticulously enumerated in the first volume alone) on their long journeys—are expectedly erotic, exquisite, and entertaining. It is likewise a tale of magic and mystery; important events and births are foretold in dreams. Brutal battles are frequent and dramatic. How better could the poet attract the ear and heart of his audience? The higher goal of the jataka, nevertheless, is to exalt the life of the Buddha in one of his prior existences, in this case as Lord Rama, and to perpetuate the teachings of Buddhism.

As a primary text of some antiquity, the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* cannot be ignored by any serious student of Laos. Professor Sahai's study includes a 600-page, heavily annotated translation of the original text, 100 pages of introductory background and exegesis, and a detailed index for each of the two volumes. Detailed comparisons with other versions of the story are included in the introduction. Bioforms are given their Latin labels in footnotes

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wherever possible, and Indic terms and allusions are explained in the same fashion. Maps of the rivers and cities are provided, as is an extensive bibliography. This study is a gem of rigorous and engaging scholarship. Such erudition and dedication to the study of a major Lao literary classic is unparalleled—and unlikely to be surpassed by present or future scholars.

John Hartmann
Northern Illinois University

MALAYSIA

In Service and Servitude: Foreign Female Domestic Workers and the Malaysian "Modernity" Project, by Christine B. N. Chin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. xxiv + 299. $17.50, paper.

This is a long-awaited piece of research for those of us who are interested in studying migrant workers and the changing role of women in Southeast Asia. From 1993 to 1995, Christine Chin spent a considerable amount of time in Malaysia conducting in-depth interviews with foreign domestic workers, employers, employment agency staff, government officials, and activists who counsel foreign domestic workers. She also combed Malaysian archives and newspapers as well as foreign sources to produce a comprehensive picture of Malyasian domestic workers, paying particular attention to how they are perceived by employers and the state. Unlike previous studies, this one demonstrates considerable state involvement in the importation of domestic workers. It does so by highlighting the government's incorporation of foreign domestic workers into the country's modernization program. In her attempt to show this strong link, Chin focuses on two important questions:

> Why is unlegislated live-in domestic service, an essentially premodern social institution and peopled mostly by female domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia, increasingly prevalent in the context of constructing a modern developed Malaysian society by way of export-oriented development? If the in-migration of foreign female domestic workers is important to nurturing the modern caring Malaysian

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